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# The art of good feedback

*Training for effective peer feedback*

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# PEER FEEDBACK TRAINING COURSE

It is important in all forms of education that students receive effective feedback on their assignments. Students can then use this feedback to improve their skills and work towards their particular goal. Although teachers have traditionally provided such feedback, feedback from fellow students (peer feedback) can also be useful.

This training course has been developed for everyone who wants to make effective use of peer feedback, and is set up to be used at the beginning of any course. It is based on the pre-training described by Paul Rollinson (2005) for an ESL (English as a Second Language) writing class. Relevant background information from the academic literature is provided in text boxes.

## TRAINING OBJECTIVES
- Raise awareness: the principles and objectives of peer feedback;
- Encourage group interaction: students practise working together, motivating others, developing tact in giving feedback.
- Develop skills: explain different methods for giving peer feedback and practise these (introduction to basic procedure, commenting, the reader–writer dialogue and revision).

## TRAINING PROGRAMME

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### Trusting peer feedback

Teachers give feedback to improve their students' skills. However, they need to provide this feedback in phases for it to have a lasting effect. The first of these phases involves trust: students need to value the feedback that they receive. Students naturally trust their teacher, as they assume that the teacher knows more based on his or her experience. This becomes more complicated when feedback is given by a peer, as students first need to learn to trust their peers. In this case, a student cannot be certain that the feedback provided is justified and that it can realistically be integrated into his or her set of skills.

Students may therefore find it difficult to accept feedback from their peers. For them to accept it, they first need to be told why feedback, and in particular peer feedback, is so important.

*Sources: Boud (2015) and Rollinson (2005)*

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**Introduction**

The value of peer feedback compared with teacher feedback.

1. Students write down the advantages and disadvantages of peer feedback and discuss this as a class. Why are peers (who are at the same level) able to provide each other with valuable feedback?

2. The teacher takes part in the discussion and makes it clear that it has been scientifically proven that the advantages of peer feedback outweigh the disadvantages (see Text Box: Advantages of peer feedback).

3. The teacher gives a personal example and discusses how he/she used the feedback to improve his/her work. An example could be feedback from a colleague or a student's work from a previous year. This shows the form that feedback can take and the value that the teacher places on feedback, while encouraging a frank and open discussion.

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### Advantages of peer feedback

While students often take for granted that the feedback given by a teacher is correct, the same cannot be said of feedback from a peer. This could be seen as a disadvantage, but it has the clear advantage of encouraging students to think critically about the accuracy of the feedback they receive. Discussions about feedback and explaining why certain choices were made increases the effectiveness of the process. Students do not do this, or they do it less often, when they receive feedback from a teacher.

Another advantage of peer feedback is that students look differently at the written or spoken work of fellow students compared with a teacher. They may therefore come up with improvements that the teacher would not see. This is because peers provide feedback at the level of comprehension; in other words, how easy or difficult it is to understand the language used. Peers take on the role of a 'real' audience when giving feedback and can therefore make the writer aware of the better and weaker points in the text, encourage the writer to work together with other students and show him or her how to take ownership of their text. Teachers, on the other hand, induce revisions in the overall structure of the text, such as the logical organisation of paragraphs.

There is another reason why peer feedback is effective, which is that it is easier to teach students how to edit a text (take out the mistakes and improve the overall level) than to teach them how to write well. By critically reading texts written by their peers, students become more critical writers who can improve their own writing.

*Sources: Rollinson (2005), Mackey, Gass & McDonough (2000) and Tsui & Ng (2000)*

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**Discussion**

In this phase, the teacher and students discuss the purpose of peer feedback and the various roles that a peer can take when providing feedback.

4. The teacher discusses this with the group, and this discussion may include the following questions:

- Objective: 'What do you aim to achieve when you give feedback?'
- Role of the feedback provider: 'How should you give feedback and what effect does it have? What are your responsibilities as a provider of feedback?'
- Role of peer compared with role of teacher: 'What are the differences between the role of the peer compared with that of the teacher when providing feedback?'
- Relationship between feedback provider and receiver: 'What is a collaborative feedback provider? What is a corrective feedback provider? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each of these roles? Which is better?'

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### Disadvantages of peer feedback

There are also disadvantages to peer feedback that the teacher should be aware of. First of all, it is time-consuming, and this time therefore needs to be made available. Students may also find it difficult to criticise their peers or to receive criticism from them. This is exacerbated if there is a difference in age or skills level (e.g. language skills) between the students. Nevertheless, research shows that more able students also benefit from peer feedback, even if it is given by a weaker student. It is therefore important for students to learn to critically examine the work of their peers, to give feedback tactfully and to receive feedback gracefully.

Note that, although all students prefer to receive feedback from a teacher than from a peer, students who are more dismissive of peer feedback are also less accepting of teacher feedback (either consciously or subconsciously).

*Sources: Rollinson (2005), Tsui & Ng (2000) and Yu & Hu (2017)*

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**Practise using sample texts**

This phase involves practising giving adequate feedback through non-threatening activities. The students do not yet receive personal feedback but experience what it is like to receive certain types of feedback. The aim of this phase is to show the different ways in which feedback can be given and for students to experience the advantages and disadvantages of these.

5. The teacher shows various types of authentic feedback materials (e.g. from a previous year) that the students analyse and evaluate. The students consider the different ways of giving feedback and what they believe are the strengths and weaknesses of each.

# The pitfalls of giving feedback

It is not easy to give good feedback. The most common pitfalls are:

- **Feedback is often given in the form of comments or corrections without further explanation.** The person giving the feedback only states that a difference exists between the student's current level and the level that he/she needs to achieve. The assessor does not explain what the difference is (feed up) and how it can be overcome (feed forward). Research shows that students almost never learn from this corrective kind of feedback, nor do they learn to take responsibility for the learning process as they simply make corrections without having to think about them.
- **Feedback focuses mainly on the task carried out, which is often not seen again in the same form in the curriculum.** It is therefore much less focused on future tasks or the development of the person receiving the feedback. Again, this pitfall reinforces the importance of development-focused feedback, as emphasised in the point above.
- **Feedback is combined with a grade**. In this case, the feedback is used to support the grade given. This is understandable, but it means that the student tends only to focus on the grade. The student is either disappointed or relieved with the grade and therefore pays little attention to the feedback, which therefore contributes little to the learning process.
- **Feedback focuses mainly on weaknesses and much less on strengths.** We tend to provide feedback based on the mistakes that a student makes, which shifts the focus to the weaknesses. However, we should emphasise the strengths in a student's work, both in form and in content. Some students take the feedback that they receive very personally and negative feedback can damage their self-confidence. Including positive feedback reduces this effect and increases the probability that the student will accept the negative feedback. As with negative feedback, it is important that positive feedback is accompanied by an explanation of *why* something was done well.
- **Students only have one opportunity to receive feedback and improve their work.** This can be put down to time constraints, but it is better for the student if he/she can submit several drafts. Teacher's too often focus on the final product rather than the learning process. The use of peer feedback can help prevent this.

*Sources: Arts & Jaspers (2014), Lee (2009), Young (2000) and Glover & Brown (2006)*

6. Students receive a sample essay that they can comment on. They discuss as a class what can be improved and how to express these improvements clearly and supportively. *Alternative:* the teacher shows the students a sample essay that has already been provided with good feedback (see Text box: The pitfalls of giving feedback). As in the previous exercise, the students analyse different ways of giving feedback so that they have a concrete example of how to give good feedback.

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### Feedback, feed up and feed forward

Effective feedback is feedback that is explicitly related to objectives, assessment criteria and expected attainment level. People often use the terms feed *up* and feed *forward*. Whereas feedback refers to a student's performance up to this moment, feed up specifically refers to the learning objectives and describes the difference between the student's performance and the learning objectives. Feed forward is about the future – encouraging students to think about the choices they make and the steps they can take to bridge the gap between their current level and the level required. By consistently combining feedback with feed up and feed forward, students increase their understanding of the learning process and learn to take responsibility for this.

*Sources: Arts & Jaspers (2014) and Rollinson*
*(2005)*

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**Practise feedback on own work & discussion**
7. Students write a short text as a small group. The other groups then provide written or oral feedback.
8. After this, the students evaluate their own written work in their group, based on the feedback received. The students should produce a model showing which feedback they considered to be good and why, and which they considered to be poor, and the reason for that.
9. Experiences are then discussed as a class. How did it feel to receive feedback? Did it make them feel unsure in any way? Was that because of the way that the feedback was given? And, importantly, do they have to accept all the feedback given? Where does the border lie?

# Written or oral feedback?

Both written and oral feedback each have their advantages. It is therefore best to choose a combination of both forms.

One benefit of oral feedback is that it allows for a spontaneous dialogue between the person giving and the person receiving the feedback. In this dialogue, the student can say that he/she does not agree with the feedback or can ask for clarification. If the feedback provider is able to clarify his/her comments, it is more likely that the student will actually improve his/her skills. Furthermore, a lack of dialogue between the feedback provider and the student may mean that the student does not do anything with the feedback.

The benefit of written feedback is that it allows more time for reflection so that more careful, tactful feedback can be given. This also gives the person receiving the feedback the time to read everything, to think about it and to see the progress he/she is making over a longer period of time.

Teachers often use a feedback form* while also making corrections in the student's work. This means that the form does not save as much time as hoped. It is more effective to use just the form. This also helps ensure that more attention is paid to feed up (comparison with the target level) and feed forward (looking to the future) and that the feedback takes place at the process level. After all, 97.5 % of the comments made in an essay are feedback, while if a good form is used, only 42 % of the comments are feedback and 25 % can be considered feed up and 33% feed forward, which contributes much more to the student's learning process.

*Sources: Arts & Jaspers (2014), Telio, Ajjawi & Regehr (2015) and Crisp (2007)*

**\* Extra**
We have developed peer feedback forms based on insights from the literature. These forms can be adapted and completed to suit your needs. Download the forms at: www.rug.nl/wewi/feedback

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